

3 . The Changing Context for Growth and Development

The past decade was a time of unprecedented growth. Cranes and construction crews became a familiar sight in many neighborhoods and commercial areas. When the dust cleared, over eight million square feet had been added to the city's commercial landscape. Sleek office and research headquarters occupied once derelict parking lots in the East Cambridge riverfront. Kendall Square mirrored the Boston skyline (on a smaller scale) in its high-rise hotels and office towers.

The industrial tracts of Cambridgeport and Alewife became home to hundreds of cutting edge research firms and consultants. Nearly two thousand units of housing, primarily geared to the upper income market, were erected, most of them in previously non residential zones.

In contrast, less than two million square feet of commercial development was completed between 1960 and 1980. Today, few large projects are in progress or under review. Most building permits granted are for small restaurant additions or renovations and additions to the institutions. A large number of new condominiums remain unsold, vacant or held by investor owners. Portions of major projects in the development districts (Alewife, University Park, Lechmere Canal) remain on hold. Lenders, wary after the over extensions of the 1980s, have pulled back considerably, making it very difficult for new or growing enterprises to finance real estate or operations. Large anchor employers such as Lotus Development have contemplated moving some or all of their employment base to cheaper, more spacious suburban sites. The roll call of promising technology start-ups who are being lured by less expensive locations is increasing. Unemployment, long burdening blue-collar and lesser-skilled workers, now plagues white-collar professionals such as engineers. Because of lower commercial and industrial property values, homeowners' share of the tax burden has begun to creep up again.

While a few projects are on the boards or proposed for the next decade or so, Cambridge is unlikely to experience a development boom on a 1980s scale anytime soon. The combination of a hot private market, federal and state funding for infrastructure, and a decade-long planning process are not likely to be repeated often. In addition, population growth for the next twenty years is expected to be stable or modest at best, cooling large demands for new residential construction. What issues and lessons for growth policy are suggested?

Public Benefits

First, development, while clearly disruptive in some aspects, brings definite benefits. The city averaged one thousand new jobs per year. According to a survey of 91 Cambridge employers, nearly all job growth occurred in companies established since 1975, and the majority of that since 1985. Unemployment at one point was almost non-existent, falling to two percent in 1987. In such conditions, jobs outnumbered available workers, pushing up wages for even low-skilled, entry level positions. Physical improvements such as housing and parks graced areas long under used or vacant. The resurgent commercial revenue base cut homeowners' share of property taxes to one-third.

The relative prosperity of the 1980s, harnessed to long-term design plans for the former industrial districts, injected Cambridge with renewed vigor and greater latitude over its future.

Community Identity

Rapid growth brought its share of negatives as well. Rapid development changes the physical look and feel of a place quickly, making it less familiar. For example, "Mom and pop" businesses long patronized in a neighborhood may disappear or, new people, sometimes of different social or ethnic backgrounds, may replace long-term residents. For many, this can be disorienting, even frightening.

Taming the Automobile

During the 1980s, residents mired in traffic snarls became especially incensed at new development, even if the problem was also traceable to rising car ownership among city and regional residents and motorists crossing Cambridge to reach destinations in Boston or the suburbs.

From this dramatic increase in automobile traffic, an important lesson grew, the warning that the community must manage use of the automobile. Absent a willingness to totally succumb to the demands of the car, the city is very vulnerable to an increased level of auto usage and dependency: its very character as a dense but humanely scaled environment, walkable through its length and breadth, is threatened should the car truly gain ascendancy.

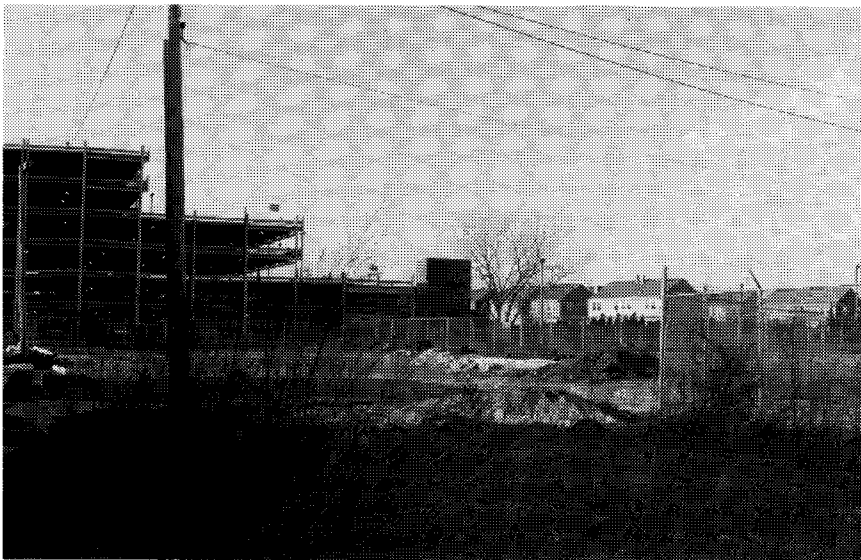
The decade did demonstrate, however, that real options are available. Detailed traffic mitigation planning was required of several large and small developments approved for construction: University Park, Alewife Center, the CambridgeSide Galleria retail mall, and several smaller developments in Harvard Square and East Cambridge. Supported by a City commitment to promote such efforts with the hiring of a Commuter Mobility Coordinator, first impressions and early results suggest that interest and self-interest on the part of the private sector make a program of alternate mobility throughout the city a real possibility for the future. Cambridge is especially favored to make such an effort successful given its compact size, relative density, and already extensive network of public transportation including seven transit stations that now serve the city.

Parking

As a corollary to the concern with traffic and congestion, the issue of parking, quantity and availability rose to the forefront of public policy discussions. Although costly to build and difficult to integrate physically into existing commercial and residential environments without significant visual and physical disruption, any parking supplied inevitably invites a car to fill it, intensifying the city's already difficult traffic problem. As the decade advanced, a more refined parking regulation seemed to be a necessary and useful step to tame the traffic and congestion problem.



The Galleria Shuttle, a result of private-public partnership, is a resounding success. Its first year (1991) it carried over a quarter million people though East Cambridge to connect with the Red and Green Lines. In its second year, it carried some 350,000 people.



Controversy surrounding the One Kendall Square parking garage illustrates the problems that can be raised by major parking structures.

Matching Land Use to the Character of Cambridge

Other information of value can be gleaned from the experiences of the 1980s. It is clear that Cambridge is more suitable as a location for some uses than others and, although the market is volatile, playing to the city's strengths would be a wise course. From a traffic perspective alone, pure general office - that is the administrative, employee-intensive functions such as banks and insurance companies - should be limited to those locations close to transit or well removed from residential neighborhoods so that their major contribution to peak hour commuter traffic can be moderated or contained. Alternately the start-up company, the research and development enterprise that might develop a line of prototypical manufacturing, would appear to be a Cambridge specialty.

Much of the commercial space in East Cambridge has been occupied by firms only recently born in Cambridge and successful beyond any possible prediction. The firms occupying the space in the evolving University Park complex fit a similar profile. This breed of enterprise is particularly well served by a wide range of physical plant from renovated old industrial buildings to specially designed space in new construction. The traffic benefits of such uses - fewer people overall and fewer trips in the congested peak commuter hours - are an added benefit. There are certain uses, which as they evolve to ever greater dependence on heavy industrial truck use, as for instance distribution facilities, probably have no appropriate place to locate in Cambridge.

New Housing in New Neighborhoods

As the opportunities for significant new housing construction were foreclosed in the existing residential neighborhoods through the successive rezonings adopted in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1980s demonstrated the feasibility of new housing construction, if sometimes at higher densities, in traditionally non residential areas. Several factors, including effective planning, as demonstrated in East Cambridge, relatively benign locations as in the narrow industrial corridors along the railroad right-of-way in North Cambridge, and a very vigorous market which seemed to guarantee the sale of any unit that could be built, contributed to the construction of large numbers of housing units in areas which had been optimistically zoned for residential use in the late 1970s. Rivercourt, Graves Landing and The Esplanade in East Cambridge, were constructed in an area carefully planned and supported by major public investments which helped to transform the industrial environment to one more favorable to residential use. The Pavil-

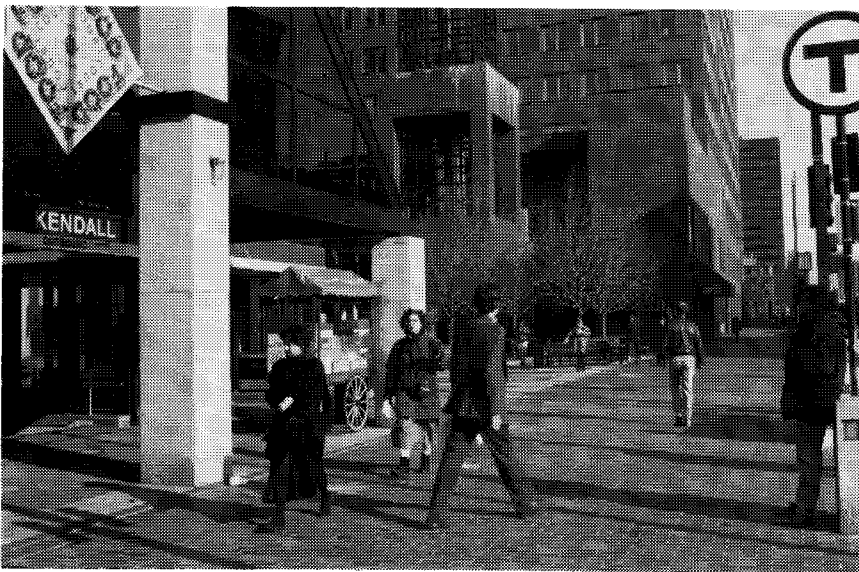
ion at 176 Gore Street, 217 and 218 Thorndike Street, 71 Fulkerson Street in East Cambridge, 129- 205 Richdale Avenue in Neighborhood 9, and 282 Sidney Street in Cambridgeport were all private developments made feasible by the private housing market in what would have been considered very marginal residential locations in earlier decades.

Reviewing Land Use Policy

The decade also demonstrated the wisdom of periodic review of public land use policy. The emerging Cambridge Center in Kendall Square is a physical manifestation of a plan adopted in the 1970s which itself was undoubtedly a reflection of the conventional wisdom for urban renewal areas formulated the decade before. Recent experience might suggest some alteration to that plan to ensure greater urban vitality through a broader mix of uses.

The East Cambridge plan is itself in part a revisionist view of the conventional urban development wisdom of the 1960s, also conceived in the 1970s but not executed fully for ten years. It vividly illustrates that even reduced development potential (both East Cambridge and Kendall Square represent significant reductions in potential development from that which prevailed before the rezonings in each area) can in specific circumstances result in very large development.

The plentiful new construction throughout the city in the 1980s has illustrated forcefully the bulk potential latent in many of the city's current zoning districts, even those that reflect reductions accomplished in the 1970s. The decade's development also indicates that bulk alone is not the only relevant consideration. To assure a better fit between the new and the old, considerations of design, materials, more subtle refinements of height and bulk and disposition on the lot are also vitally important.



Main Street in Kendall Square is animated by ground floor activity at the Food Court and other retail uses around the main plaza.

Financial Rewards

Finally the financial consequences of the 1980s development boom must be highlighted. Seriously constrained at the opening of the decade due to a stagnant tax base and Proposition 2 1/2, the City had significantly improved its financial circumstances by the late 1980s. By 1991, two-thirds of the city's property tax burden was borne by the commercial sector. As late as 1981 that ratio was almost precisely reversed, with residential property owners paying three-quarters of the property tax bill.

Throughout the 1980s, the City was able to take maximum advantage of all state and the dwindling number of federal programs available to advance its policy objectives in housing, park development and renovation and reconstruction of long-neglected infrastructure while continuing the many social and educational programs central to the City's mission to serve its residents.

The environment for growth policy has altered dramatically. Today's slower pace of growth affords a breathing space to take stock of past and present development and craft a vision for the future. With fewer projects proposed or in the works, it is a good time to step back from the 'bricks and mortar' and consider the social and physical context of development and its future shape and direction. It is both an opportunity and an imperative, given widespread concerns with the negative impacts of recent growth, and the different problems posed by a stalled development climate. With fewer federal and state resources available to finance amenities and shape development positively, the City bears a greater burden of responsibility to finance services, to promote economic development and to meet environmental goals. Cambridge is largely built-up, except for its older industrial areas, increasing their importance as a resource and highlighting the necessity to choose the new uses and patterns of development there carefully.

Now is a good time to explore how economic development and environmental protection and management can be interrelated rather than competing goals. To this end, an important guiding concept is sustainability. Sustainable development means viable growth measured by good jobs and increased community wealth, not just redistribution of resources. In addition, the goal is better quality of life for all citizens, measured by investments in cultural and other public services, in children, the elderly, and all segments of the community. The environment should be improved through better air and water quality and enhanced recreational and cultural opportunities. In sum, investments should be made that improve both the economy and the quality of life for the community.